

## Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> October – The Lord’s Prayer 2 – Forgiveness

Ps 51:1-12

1 John 1:5-2:2

Luke 15:11-32

Today we continue our brief sermon series thinking about the Lord’s Prayer. Last week we looked at the opening phrases “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name”. Today we jump on a bit to pick out “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”

I was preaching at St John’s and Christ the King Churches last Sunday, and I began my sermon by thinking about the relationships that are at the heart of those opening words of the prayer - Our Father.

First our relationship with God. God is not an “up there” and remote God, but one who wants us to have a close and personal relationship with him. A relationship that makes prayer possible. In today’s gospel reading we can picture God as the loving father running with open arms to welcome us home.

And then our relationships with each other. God is **Our** Father, not just my father or your father but our father. We are connected to all humanity across time and distance. We are family – with God and with each other.

And the reason I have started with those thoughts is that today’s section of the prayer is about what happens when those relationships - with God and with each other – are fractured. It’s about how healing can take place and how those relationships which underpin our prayers can be restored. Its about forgiveness and reconciliation.

And perhaps the first thing to notice is the connection between those relationships. “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”. I don’t think Jesus is saying that God won’t forgive us if we don’t forgive others, rather that since forgiveness is about the restoring of relationships it simply doesn’t make sense to say we can have a restored relationship with God if, at the same time, our relationships with others are broken. The two are so interconnected.

The gospel reading illustrates this well.

Traditionally the story Jesus told has been called the story of the prodigal son, focussing on the behaviour of the younger son – the prodigal. A better name might be the story of the lost sons – thinking not just of the younger one but also of the older son. And it’s the older son I would like to look at for a moment.

He clearly had no time for his brother. Perhaps we can sympathise. His brother had effectively wished his father was dead when he asked for his share of the inheritance. When the younger son left home, he also left the work on the estate to the older son and his father. The impression the story gives us is that the work fell mainly on the older son – we can picture the father looking out for his other son to return, not taking much interest in the estate. And when the younger so returns we see that the relationship between the older son and his brother had broken down

completely – he says to his father at the end of the story “this son of yours”. No longer his brother, but only his father’s son.

And that first relationship breakdown has led to another. There is no love between older son and father “all these years I have been working like a slave for you”. The bitterness and anger that led to the breakdown of the brothers’ relationship has also led to the father – son relationship being damaged. The two relationships are both broken because they are connected.

The fall out from broken relationships is all around us. In families – perhaps even in our own family, in communities, in churches. Its there on the global scale too. Witness the events of this past week. Violence, hatred, destruction, indiscriminate killing. People from different backgrounds, faiths or nationalities are vilified; they are labelled as ‘other’, essentially emphasising that there is no relationship bond between them. Its almost as if they are seen as non human. And once there is no relationship, once there is no connection, once there is no common humanity all sorts of horrors follow – as we have seen this week.

We were thinking about forgiveness in our sermon just a few weeks ago. You may recall that I told the story of a woman whose son had been killed in a random act of violence in Nottingham. And how after a long and painful journey with much heart searching, she reached the point where she could forgive the young man who murdered her son. She said at the end of the story that *Forgiveness for me means being at peace, letting go of the bitterness.*

Perhaps this gives us a clue as to what Jesus was getting at when he made this connection between God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of each other. If we hold anger and bitterness in our hearts, we are simply not in the right place to have the loving relationship God would love us to have with him. We are not at peace.

Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus makes this point much more clearly. In Matthew’s gospel we read *So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

Which is one of the reasons why we share the Peace with each other in our communion services. Not just to wave and greet our friends, but to give that opportunity to put things right, to mend and heal relationships before we meet around the communion table, before we commune with God.

The reading from 1 John contains some similar thoughts. *If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*

So how does all this help us as we pray. After all, that’s what this sermon series is all about. How can this pattern of prayer that Jesus gives us enable us to grow in our own prayer lives.

I think the most important thing we can draw from what we have been thinking about today – and the thing that can revolutionise our prayer lives – is that prayer and life are interconnected.

Our relationship with God - as demonstrated in our times of prayer - is not simply a private matter that has little or no effect on our actions or attitudes, nor is it unaffected by the way we live, by the things we do or think or say. Indeed, that relationship is shaped by what we do and our attitudes to people and the world around us, and those actions and attitudes are shaped by it.

Prayer leads to action. And that is true not just as we seek to do good in the world around us, not just as we seek to live as God wants us to live. Its true also as we receive forgiveness and then move to forgiving others. It brings hope and healing to a world that so desperately needs it. It points to a way of life which is radically different from the way of the world. The way that Jesus shows us. The way of the Kingdom of God.

Prayer changes things and people. It changes our attitudes, our thoughts, our words and our actions. It changes the way we look at things around us and people around us; it changes the small and the big, the local and the global. It does this through the way our relationship with the God of love changes us, makes us more like Jesus. Prayer helps us make a difference and to be the difference.

We generally start our acts of worship with prayers for forgiveness. Prayers for God to forgive us. As we do that week by week, may it be a reminder for us to look at our relationships with others. For it is only when relationships with others are right that we can begin to make and be the difference that God wants us to be.